DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 614 JC 000 553

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TITLE	The Role of the Community College in Welfare Reform since Passage of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996.
PUB DATE	2000-07-18
NOTE	9p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Vocational Education; College Role; *Community Colleges; Government School Relationship; *Job Training; *Labor Force Development; Legislation; *Public Policy; *School Community Programs; School Community Relationship; Two Year Colleges; Welfare Recipients; *Welfare Services
IDENTIFIERS	*Personal Responsibility and work Opp Recon Act; Welfare Reform

ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the impact of welfare reform on the community college and discusses how community colleges are responding to this important social and economic issue. One of the main tenants of the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill is to shift the responsibility for welfare to the states, requiring that half of all able-bodied recipients find work by the year 2002. Many have looked to the community colleges for answers. Dakota County Technical College in Minnesota, in conjunction with federal and state agencies, local industries, and Minnesota colleges and universities, received a grant to improve the skills of those current workers whose training has become obsolete and to develop lifelong learning techniques among the workers. These improvements will not only improve the wages of the workers and promote retention, but will ensure that the workers have the basic skills necessary to adapt if the job landscape shifts. Some experts note several barriers that have impacted the transition of welfare-to-work programs: problems with transportation; the lack of child-care; problems of alcohol and drug abuse; and the elevated prevalence of learning disabilities in these populations. Information sharing will help community colleges with novice programs learn from the experiences of other colleges. (JA)

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Running head: WELFARE REFORM AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The Role of the Community College in Welfare Reform since Passage of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996

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I. Introduction

On August 22, 1996, amidst much controversy and dissent within his own party, President Clinton signed the Welfare Reform Bill into law. One of the main tenants of this bill is to shift the responsibility for welfare to the states, requiring that half of all (able-bodied) recipients find work by the year 2002. This bill also limits the benefits that an individual can receive to five years. Next, the bill creates a child support collection system, and requires that all unwed teenage parents live at home and attend school (Vobejda, 1996). This bill, a result of vast political and social forces, such as the desire to balance the federal budget and to hold individuals accountable for their own well-being, has created a demand for organizations who are ready and willing to take in and train this new group. As a result of this need, many have looked to the community colleges as for answers, considering their reputation as "genuine solution-providers" (Kelly, 1997) for many of the imposing dilemmas facing our culture.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to address the impact of welfare reform on the community college and how community colleges are responding to this important social and economic issue. Specifically, this paper will discuss examples of programs designed and implemented by community colleges to facilitate the transition from welfare to work for this demographic. Finally, barriers impeding this transition will be discussed, as well as future directions and conclusions regarding this movement.

II. Current Status of Community College Involvement with Welfare Students

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2000), a recent effort was made in order to assess the present condition of welfare recipients within the community college system. A short survey was distributed to 1124 community colleges

that examined information regarding the various aspects of students receiving public assistance. Chief among these aspects were tracking data and welfare-to-work or job training programs. Of the 38% that responded, the results indicated that less than one-third of all colleges track those who are on public assistance. The main reasons that most colleges provided for not tracking these students include student privacy, the colleges' lack of desire to do so, no such requirement from the state, or that the college has plans to track students in the future. With regard to job-training programs, nearly half of all responding colleges indicated that they offer such programs to welfare recipients, and most of the remaining colleges have plans to offer such programs in the near future. Finally, with respect to time of enrollment in these programs, over two-thirds of those responding indicated that the programs lasted no more than two years, while the remaining colleges that offer job-training programs allow participation for up to three years.

III. Community College Programs

Following passage of the Welfare Reform Bill, Massachusetts Community Colleges (MACC) implemented a comprehensive program for education and training of families who are in transition from welfare to work. The goal of the program is to provide high quality and rigorous training in academic and vocational areas to these individuals. At the same time, the program was designed to be relatively brief due to the fact that many welfare recipients in transition have a finite period of time (usually less than two years) to find employment (Motta, 1999). The program, implemented by MACC, offers non-credit courses for recipients who lack a high school diploma or equivalency, and offers both credit and non-credit courses for those with a high school education. In addition to

academic and vocational training, the program provides intense "workforce readiness programs" (Motta, 1999, p. 248), which assist students with job placement. This program, the author adds, is constantly changing, whereby the MACC meets monthly with employers, faculty, and staff in order to share ideas to improve the program and make the transition easier for the welfare recipient.

This approach sounds like a step in the right direction. However, one must consider the type of training that the individual is receiving, which is not mentioned by the author. Are these individuals being trained in a field or given a skill that may be obsolete in a few years? Also, are they being taught a balance of academic and workforce training skills so that the individuals will be able to adapt to changing markets? Finally, how much employer input is being considered? As has happened in other areas of the country, employers have used the community college system as an inexpensive training ground to serve their own interests, yet the student does not learn valuable skills other than those necessary to work in that particular company. This often does not improve the situation of the employee, especially if the employer is no longer in business.

An example of a college that is apparently taking the right approach to handling these questions is Dakota County Technical College (DCTC) in Minnesota. With a booming economy in the surrounding area, coupled with a lack of qualified workers (such as those coming off of the welfare roles) who lack even the most basic skills, DCTC took the initiative in addressing the issue of workforce needs. DCTC, in conjunction with federal and state agencies, local industries, and Minnesota colleges and universities, received a grant to improve the skills of those current workers whose training has become obsolete, and to develop lifelong learning techniques among the workers. These improvements, as

has been suggested, will not only improve the wages of the workers and promote retention, but will ensure that the workers have the basic skills necessary to adapt if the job landscape shifts (Thomas & Wagner, 2000).

IV. Barriers to Welfare-to-Work

While many community colleges across the nation are making strides in helping welfare recipients make the transition from welfare to work smoother and providing valuable job skills training, some believe that the effort is falling short of the mark. As Carnevale (2000) from Educational Testing Service (ETS) stated in a recent press release, many of those formerly on public assistance have "progressed only one or two rungs up the economic ladder." There are several flaws in the argument that the author makes, with only a couple being the fact that many of the former welfare recipients lack many of the most basic skills and education necessary to find employment, and many have unstable work histories making advancement sluggish. It may be unreasonable to expect substantial economic improvement within this population as a result of welfare reform programs that have only been in place for only a few years. However, one can infer from the author's argument that barriers to making the transition is an area worthy of further discussion.

According to Katsinas, Banachowski, Bliss, and Short (1999) there are several notable barriers that have impacted the transition of welfare-to-work programs. The authors note that problems with transportation is the most significant barrier to students in these programs, with 68% of the 19 reporting institutions in their study indicating this as a major barrier. In rural locations especially, meeting the "20 hour rule" requiring students to work at least 20 hours per week, creates an obstacle due to lack of public

transportation coupled with lack of proximity to work sites. Another noteworthy barrier reported by 63% of the community colleges surveyed is the lack of child-care, as many of the welfare recipients are single parents, with little or no family support.

Not only are there physical and familial barriers that must be overcome, there exists other social barriers to learning and success that may further hinder the welfare-to-work transition. Problems of alcohol and drug abuse, although certainly not absent from traditional college populations, are more prevalent among those leaving the welfare roles. Over one-third of the survey respondents indicated that drug and alcohol habits are major problems that negatively impact their program's retention and success rates. Whereas the welfare case workers are familiar with procedures that are used when dealing with these problems, many in the community college system are not prepared to deal with them. Another educational barrier experienced in the welfare-to-work programs is the elevated prevalence of learning disabilities in these populations. Almost 60% of community colleges with these programs reported that the increased prevalence of learning disabilities within these populations creates an obstacle to success in the welfare-to-work program.

V. Conclusions and Directions

Some have wondered (Katsinas, et al., 1999) whether training and education of welfare recipients in transition to work is appropriate with regard to the mission of the community college. Some argue that the community college is not equipped to handle the entire responsibility for helping individuals make the transition from welfare-to-work. While this thought is certainly important to consider, others firmly believe that the community college needs to be the leader in providing this training. Manzo (1997)

reported that collaborative efforts with industry and governmental agencies are more successful than stand alone programs offered within a single community college. Collaborative efforts seem to be more successful than individual programs due to better communication. Improved communication facilitates articulation between the needs of industry and the programs. Financial considerations are also a major reason why these programs are more successful. By distributing the financial burden of training participants, each participant is likely to receive better instruction and individual needs are more likely to be met. This improvement in meeting participant needs will most likely result from the participant's a sense of accomplishment from being able to work with members of business community and developing the "I can do it" attitude that work experience can foster.

Welfare reform has made an impact on the societal role that the community colleges play. It has been only four years since welfare reform was enacted, however many community colleges have had welfare-to-work programs in place prior to that event, and many more have stepped up to the plate and taken the initiative of starting these programs. Despite some critics of these programs, it appears that the community colleges are moving in the right direction regarding this issue. It is important that information regarding successful programs is shared in order to better help those still coming off of the welfare rolls, who are probably even more challenging than the initial participants, find an easier transition into welfare-to-work programs. This information sharing will also ensure that community colleges that are starting to implement new programs will benefit from the experiences of other colleges.

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